

Assessment of Children in Pre-Kindergarten

“Ethical, appropriate, valid, and reliable assessment of children’s strengths, progress, and needs should be a part of all early childhood programs,” according to the 2003 Joint Position Statement of the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) and the National Association of Early Childhood Specialists in State Departments of Education (NAECS/SDE). Further, the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) reports that “child assessment is a vital and growing component of high-quality early childhood programs” (Epstein, Schweinart, DeBruin-Parecki, Robin, 2004). This brief provides North Carolina’s definition and description of appropriate assessment of young children reflective of these and other current early childhood resources.

ASSESSMENT DEFINED

Child assessment is the systematic process of observing, recording, and documenting what children do and how they do it. The major purpose of child assessment in pre-kindergarten is to make ongoing educational decisions such as:

- Informing and supporting learning, curriculum, and instruction of each and every child;
- Showing child progress; and
- Identifying children who may need additional services and supports.

Child assessment is often thought of as formal testing with standardized measures, but it actually requires many components, measures, and procedures. Effective practices in early childhood education support the use of “**authentic, ongoing assessment**” with young children. Authentic, ongoing assessment is “a form of assessment in which children are observed while working, playing and performing real-world tasks that demonstrate meaningful application of essential knowledge and skills” (Mueller, 2003). Early childhood educators obtain information about children in multiple ways (e.g., through observation, children’s work samples, rating scales) and on a consistent, on-going basis (e.g., throughout the day while children are playing indoors and outdoors). Authentic, on-going assessment provides information about what children **CAN DO** in settings where they are most comfortable, whether home, classroom, or community — in other words, in real-life settings and during daily routines.

Early childhood educators using authentic, ongoing assessment gather facts about all aspects of the child’s individual development, growth, strengths, needs, and interests and about his or her family’s culture, language, and priorities. Information is gathered through multiple sources, using formal and informal procedures such as:


- Family interviews during home visits, meetings and conferences;
- Observation of children during play, projects and other learning activities and experiences;
- Documentation of children’s work represented through photos, dictation, anecdotal notes and other artifacts;
- Checklists and rating scales for monitoring children’s ongoing learning, growth and development;
- Portfolios illustrating children’s progress in all domains of development; and
- Normative and criterion-referenced tests used in conjunction with other measures and strategies.

Through authentic, ongoing assessment, educators gather useful information about young children, including stages of development, interests and temperament, social relationships, how they learn, responses to new situations, and changes in behavior.

RECOMMENDED PRACTICES

Authentic, ongoing assessment methods are developmentally appropriate, culturally and linguistically responsive, tied to children’s daily activities, supported by professional development, inclusive of families, and connected to specific, beneficial purposes (NAEYC, NAECS/SDE, 2003; Epstein et al., 2004, DEC Recommended Practices, 2005). Successful implementation of authentic, ongoing assessment of young children requires:

- Training adults to observe and know what to look for in all areas of development and how to clearly and objectively write factual notes about what they have observed and heard children do and say;
- Sampling children’s behavior, art work, scribbles, writing and other creations on a regular basis;
- Reflecting thoughtfully about observations of children and their work by organizing information in chronological order, by areas of development, and objectively analyzing the meaning of this information for children’s progress, needs, interests, and temperament.



Early childhood educators need to know the children, child development and their curriculum in order to know what to look for and how to effectively use the information for making ongoing educational decisions.

Ethical and professional standards related to child assessment require that:

- Assessments, both data and procedures, must be used for the purpose for which they were validated;
- Assessment should always be used by trained personnel who closely adhere to their professional code of ethics;
- Assessments must include multiple sources and methods; and
- Normative and criterion-referenced results on young children should **not** be used **in isolation** for high-stakes decision making such as program and teacher performance rating and child promotion, placement or labeling purposes.

USES OF ASSESSMENT RESULTS

Data gathered from authentic, ongoing assessment help early childhood educators know how each child is progressing and effectively plan for each child's learning. All assessment information should be shared with the child's family. Assessment data is especially helpful to:

- Identify children who may need to be referred for specialized services;
- Document behaviors that a child may exhibit in order to implement specialized learning and/or behavioral supports to help him or her to be successful in a particular classroom setting;
- Plan instruction for individuals and groups of children;
- Guide and promote engagement of each child based on individual abilities, interests and temperament;
- Track children's progress and generate individual and classroom reports;
- Determine program effectiveness and personnel development needs.

INAPPROPRIATE USES OF ASSESSMENT RESULTS

In general, caution should be used when interpreting and using normative and criterion-referenced tests of young children's learning, especially if other sources and methods of gathering developmental information have not been used. It is difficult to assess children's cognitive abilities before age 6 and only 25 percent of early academic performance is predicted from preschool and kindergarten tests (Shepard, Kagan, Wurtz, 1998; Meisels, 2003).

ASSESSMENT TRAINING

Training in the appropriate use of assessment instruments for instructional planning should be part of initial staff development in pre-kindergarten programs for all teaching staff who have not previously completed appropriate training. Further, ongoing professional development should support effective instructional assessment and planning.

REFERENCES AND RESOURCES

- DEC Recommended Practices (2005). Available at www.dec-sped.org.
- Epstein, A.; Schweinart, L., DeBruin-Parecki, A., Robin, K. (2004). Preschool assessment: A guide to developing a balanced approach. Preschool Policy Matters (7); New Brunswick, NJ: National Institute for Early Education Research. Available at nieer.org.
- Kagan, S., Scott-Little, C., Clifford, R. (2003). Assessing young children: What policy makers need to know and do. In Assessing the state of state assessments: Perspectives on assessing young children. Greensboro: SERVE, 5-11.
- Meisels, S. (2003). Can Head Start pass the test? Education Week, 22(27), 44 & 29.
- Mueller, J. (2003). Authentic assessment: What is it? Available at <http://jonathan.mueller.faculty.noctrl.edu/toolbox/whatisit.htm>
- NAEYC (2003). Early Childhood Curriculum, Assessment, and Program Evaluation. A Joint Position Statement of the National Association for the Education of Young Children and the National Association of Early Childhood Specialists in State Departments of Education. Available at naeyc.org. (Also see NAEYC 2005 Program Standards related to child assessment on this website.)
- NC Department of Public Instruction (2004). Foundations: Early Learning Standards for North Carolina Preschoolers and Strategies for Guiding Their Success. Raleigh: Public Schools of North Carolina. Available at www.ncprek.nc.gov.
- Shepard, L., Kagan, S., & Wurtz, E. (1998). Principles and recommendations for early childhood assessments. Washington, DC: National Education Goals Panel.
- Trister-Dodge, D.; Heroman, C., Charles, J. & Maiorca, J. (2004). Beyond outcomes: How ongoing assessment supports children's learning and leads to meaningful curriculum. Young Child, 59(1), 20-30.